

Real and Fictional Referents in Linguistic Fieldwork

Katie Sardinha

UC Berkeley

*4th International Conference on Language Documentation and
Conservation, Honolulu, HI*

February 27, 2015

Fieldwork

- Kwak'waka (Wakashan)
 - since 2009
- Turkmen (Turkic)
 - since 2013

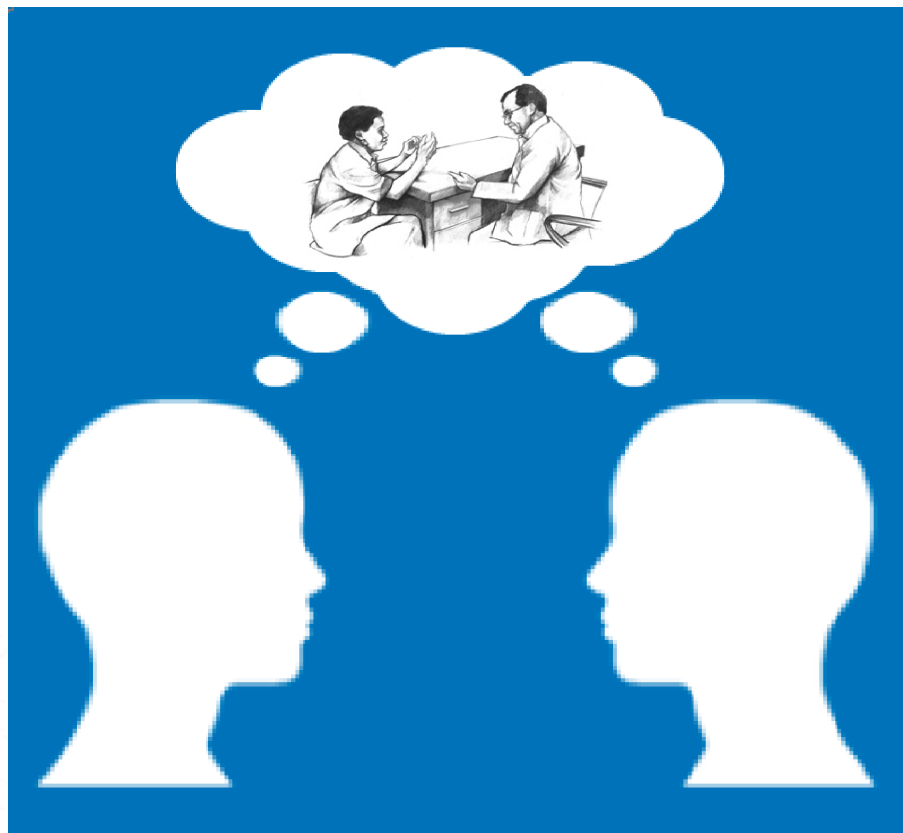


Using stories to investigate language

- In *language documentation*:
 - Story-telling can be used to record a wide range of linguistic structures.
- In *semantic fieldwork*:
 - Stories can be used as *context* in order to learn about fine-grained aspects of word and sentence meaning.



Semantic Fieldwork



Matthewson (2004); Anderbois and Henderson (2013); Deal (2013)

Semantic fieldwork (cont.)

In-context translation task

- *Example:* ‘to think’ vs. ‘to understand’ (Turkmen)

KS: Okay, lets say our physics teacher gave us a really hard question, and she said that we might not be able to solve it. And she made us think about the question for a day before we were allowed to give up on it. How would we say, ‘the teacher made us think about the question for a day’.

S1: Kay, so it would be something like...

- (1) *bidhing mogallymymydh bidhi bu thorag baarada byr gün...*
our teacher.1PL.POSS 1PL.ACC this question about one day
...*pikir etirdi.*
thought do.CAUS.PST.3SG
‘Our teacher made us *think* about the question for one whole day.’

Semantic fieldwork (cont.)

In-context felicity judgment task

- (Continuation of context from previous slide)

KS: And so if I said...*bidhing mogallymymydh bidhi bu thorog
baarada byr gün lap düshündürdi*, does that make any sense? Or no?

NA: No... yeah, no I don't think in Turkmen we say it.

(2) # *bidhing mogallymymydh bidhi bu thorag baarada byr gün...*
our teacher.1PL.POSS 1PL.ACC this question about one day
...*düşündürdi*.
understand.CAUS.PST.3SG

'Our teacher made us *understand* about the question for one whole day.'

Questions

- *Q1: Who do we tell stories about?*
 1. **Hannah** betrayed **Alexis**.
- Two possibilities:
 - Hannah and Alexis are *real people*
 - Hannah and Alexis are *fictional characters*
- *Q2: Does it make a difference?*
- *Data:* corpus of close transcriptions (Kwak'wala, Turkmen)
- *Goals of the talk:*
 - Raise awareness
 - Suggest practical advice

Stories about *real people*

- Stories about real people are *engrossing*.
- Consultants often enter the story and empathize with its characters...

Example: My soup turned black! (Kwak'wala)

KS: So I'm making soup, and I leave it for a few minutes alone.
And then Hannah comes in while I'm gone and she puts her
favourite spice in it and it turns black!

S2: Ewwww!

KS: And so I come in, and I look at it, and I say, 'my soup turned
black!'

S2: 'masan sup! La'mox tsutuwa'. [*What's with my soup! Its
black!*']

Stories about *real people*

- Stories about *real people* are **vivid** and relatively **easy to imagine**.

Example: Selling carpets (Turkmen)

[Task: going over sentences from a published Turkmen grammar]

KS: And one is like, men bu haalyny thatmaly däl.

S3: men bu haalyny thatmaly däl....Its like, uh, its like 'I must not sell this carpet'.

KS: Yeah. And what kind of situation could you use that sentence in?

S3: So its like, lets say uh, lets say you are selling carpets, and while you are selling carpets you are sitting on one of the carpets, and someone came in and he's like, 'I wanna buy *this* one'. And lets say your parents or your boss told you not to sell this one, you can't sell this one, but you can sell all the other ones. You can say, men bu haalyny thatmaly däl. Its for me.

KS: Okay cool.

S3: I mean that's actually, that was a true story, because I went with a friend to – there's like a dessert bazaar, there's a market where they sell carpets there. Anyways, there was one tourist who wanted to buy a carpet that someone was sitting on...it was actually in Turkmenistan, I was once a translator for visitors from Malaysia.

Stories about *real people*: Pitfalls

- In many cases, it can be inappropriate to tell stories about *real people*.
 - With consultants you don't know very well
 - With taboo concepts (grieve, kill, die, hate)
- Ethical considerations if recordings will be made public

Stories about fictional characters

- Stories about *fictional characters* can be used when you don't want to talk about real people.



'Scott'



'Monica'



'Betty'

Example: Sink on purpose (Kwak'wala)

KS: So poor Norman's canoe sank, and he's really competitive with his friend Bill so he thinks that maybe Bill sabotaged his canoe. And he gets really angry and he wants to make Bill angry. So that evening Norman sneaks over to Bill's house, and he fills Bill's canoe with water and he sinks it...So how would you say, 'Norman sunk Bill's canoe'?

S4: *lux Normanx wans'idxux xwakwanexs Bill.*

['Norman went and sunk Bill's canoe.']

KS: And then how would you add that he did it on purpose? Norman sunk Bill's canoe on purpose?

S4: *o'mux Normanx hinuma kas he gwix'idax xwak'wanes Bill.* *['Norman just purposely did that to Bill's canoe.']* Norman did it purposely.

Stories about *fictional characters*: Pitfalls

- In translation tasks, fictional characters can lead to different types of *confusions*:
 - **Slips**: forgetting a name
 - **Substitutions**: saying the wrong name
 - **Mix-ups**: saying the wrong referent
- E.g. 0-3 confusions per 1.5hr session is typical in my experience; almost all confusions involve characters that are fictional and unfamiliar.

What makes fictional characters harder to work with?

- Findings from psycholinguistic research:
 1. “...**concrete**, animate, **imageable** concepts are processed faster than words denoting **abstract**, inanimate, **less imageable** concepts.”
 2. Referents higher on the **accessibility hierarchy** are processed faster: pronoun < name < definite < indefinite.

(Jaeger and Tily 2010)

Debrief

- Talk about *real people*, when this is appropriate.
- Use *fictional characters* when necessary; try to reduce confusion by keeping the number of such characters introduced in a session low.
- *Note:* In choosing the names of fictional characters, be careful which names you choose to use!

A middle way?

Shared Fictional Universes

- What if we could talk about people who are *vivid* and *familiar*, but not technically *real*?
- E.g. think of your favourite characters in a novel, soap opera, TV drama

Shared Fictional Universes: Fictional characters in a single session

KS: Okay, so I want to talk about some people.
So this is **Mabel**.

VB: **Mabel**.

KS: And this is her kids, **Vicky** and **Toby**.

VB: Who?

KS: **Toby** – oh sorry, **Toby**...

VB: And who?

KS: ...and **Vicky**.

VB: Oh **Vicky**, okay.

KS: Okay, so...so **Vicky**'s a teenager, and sometimes she takes care of **Toby** while her mom is at work. And **Vicky** does lots of cooking, and she helps around the house, and that kind of thing. How would I say, '**Mabel** says **Vicky** is a really good daughter'.

VB: niki Mabel tlu:ma ikaŋ xwanukw...(aŋwatla? Vicky, e')...Vicky...i gaŋanaŋ. ['Mabel said, 'my child (who's that? Vicky, yeah) is a really good daughter'.



Shared Fictional Universes (cont.)

[Later in the same session]



KS: So this is **Mabel**.

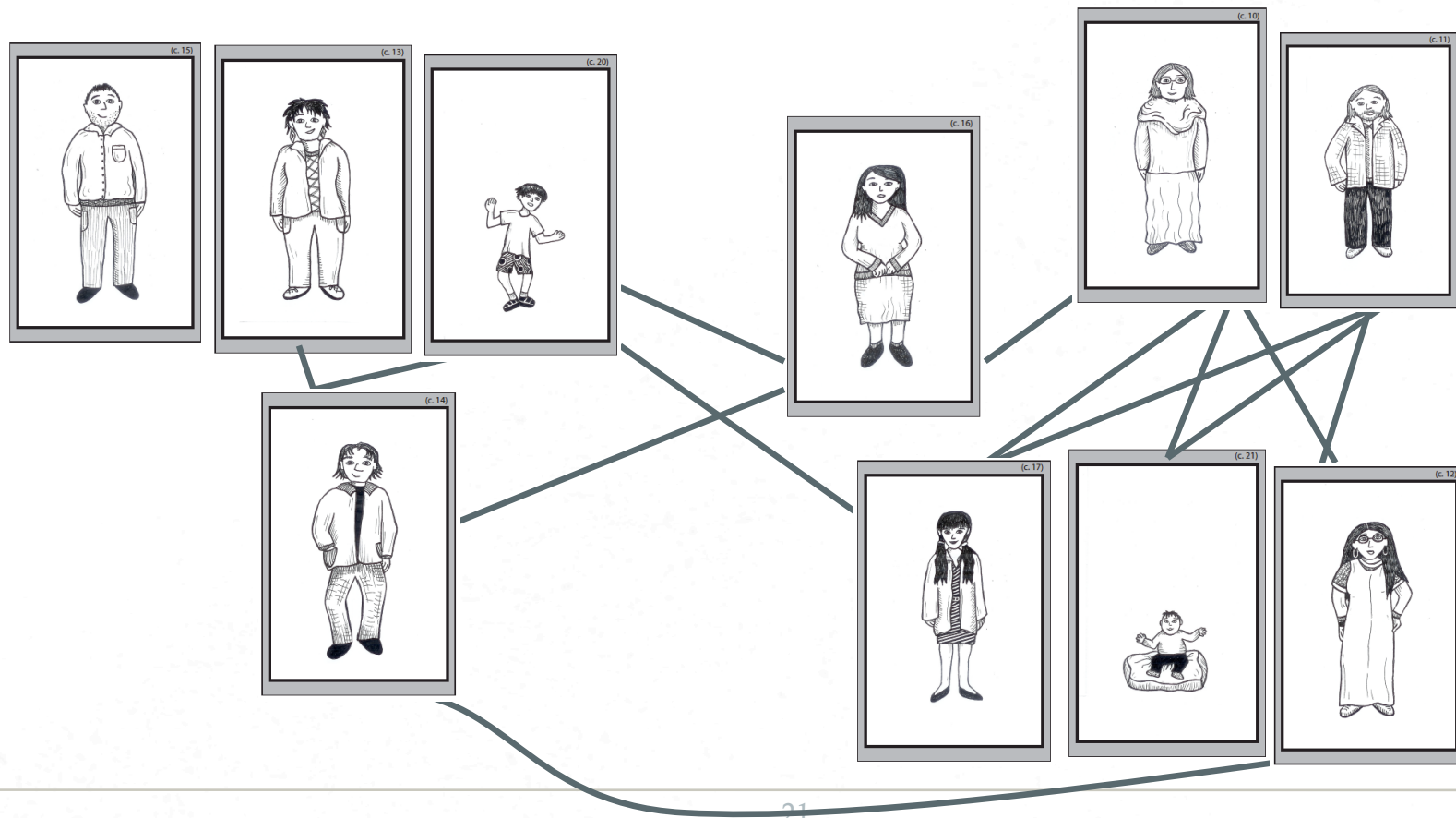
S5: **Mabel** again.

KS: So **Mabel** needed to make a cake really really quickly, but she didn't have any eggs. So she called her daughter **Vicky**, and told her to run and get some eggs and be quick about it. So how would you say something like, '**Mabel** made **Vicky** run to the store to get some eggs'.

S5: *li Mabel wa'xalax Vicky ke le's ax'ixa tsigwanu.* [*'Mabel asked Vicky to go and get some eggs.'*]

Shared Fictional Universes (cont.)

- E.g. fictional characters across sessions.



Conclusions

- Who we tell stories *about* makes a difference in elicitation!
- **Closing thought:** Paying close attention to the *properties* of stories we use in elicitation, and thinking closely about how speakers think through different types of stories, can help us improve elicitation outcomes.

References

“Character cards” downloadable at www.story-builder.ca

Anderbois, Scott & Robert Henderson. 2013. Linguistically establishing discourse context: Two case studies from Mayan languages. To appear in M. Ryan Bochnak & Lisa Matthewson (eds.), *Methodologies in Semantic Fieldwork*. Oxford University Press.

Deal, Amy Rose. 2013. Reasoning about equivalence in semantic fieldwork. To appear in M. Ryan Bochnak & Lisa Matthewson (eds.), *Methodologies in Semantic Fieldwork*. Oxford University Press.

Jaeger, T.F. and Tily, H. 2010. On language ‘utility’: Processing complexity and communicative efficiency. *WIREs Cognitive Science*, 2, 323-335.

Matthewson, Lisa. 2004. On the methodology of semantic fieldwork. *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 70(4): 369-415.